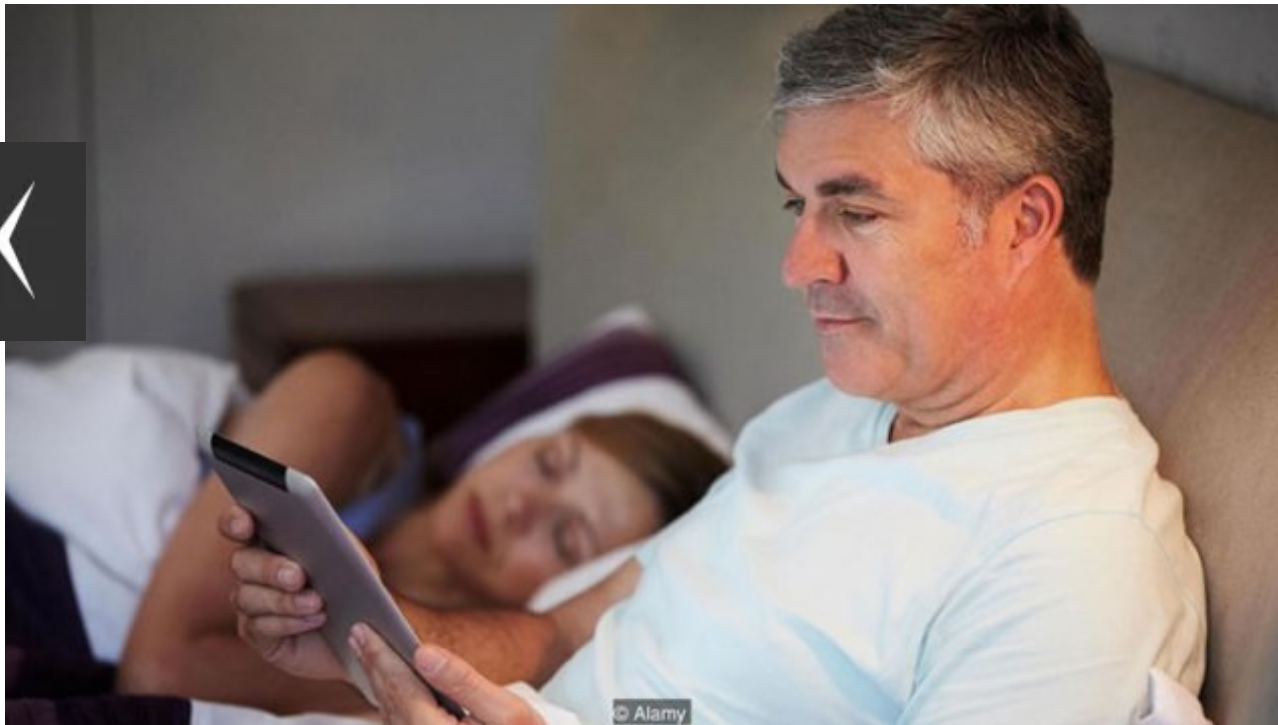


# Why are we having less sex - Research

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As the sexual revolution of the 1970s matured, societal norms shifted with it, with

increasing acceptance of homosexuality, divorce, pre-marital sex, and alternative relationships such as polyamory and swinging.

Despite this, research suggests that we're actually having less sex now than we have for decades.

On average, Americans had sex nine fewer times per year in the early 2010s compared to the late 1990s – a 15% drop

In March, American researchers Jean Twenge, Ryne Sherman and Brooke Wells published an article in the Archives of Sexual Behavior showing that [Americans were having sex on average nine fewer times per year](#) in the early 2010s compared to the late 1990s – a 15% drop from 62 times a year to just 53. The declines were similar across gender, race, region, educational level and work status, with married people reporting the most significant drops.

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...which could be easy to dismiss this as a one-off, or a symptom of the challenges of researching people's sex lives, this is another point in a growing trend across the world. In 2013, the [National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles \(Natsal\)](#) found that British people between ages 16 and 44 had sex just under five times per month. This was a drop from the previous survey, released in 2000, where men were recorded to have sex 6.2 times a month, and women 6.3 times. In 2014 the [Australian National Survey of Sexual Activity](#) showed that people in heterosexual relationships were having sex on average 1.4 times per week, down from 1.8 times 10 years earlier. The situation is perhaps most severe in Japan, where recent data has shown that 46% of women and 25% of men between the ages of 16 and 25 'despise' sexual contact.

Why is this happening?

While there are many simple conclusions available, BBC Future dug deeper and found a situation that is quite complex.

Porn blame

An easy first conclusion to make is that increased access to technology is to blame.

Two technologies are usually targeted: online pornography and social media.



With the growth of online pornography, researchers have looked at its addictive potential, with some trying to label 'internet sex addiction' as an official psychiatric disorder. As an addiction, it is argued that porn acts as a replacement for real-life sex, limiting our sexual desire in the bedroom.



Social media and pornography are often blamed for damaging our sex lives - yet the evidence is far from clear cut (Credit: Alamy)

Porn is also blamed for its unrealistic imagery, with researchers arguing this can create symptoms such as 'sexual anorexia', or 'porn induced sexual dysfunction'. In

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Foresta argued, means that these people became inured to “even the most violent” images. According to this theory, these unrealistic images found in porn make it difficult for men in particular to get aroused when encountering the real thing, resulting in them becoming ‘hopeless’ in the bedroom.

Some researchers have even argued there is a link between porn and marriage rates.

In a study in 2014, researchers Michael Malcolm and George Naufal surveyed 1,500 participants in the United States to analyse how 18 to 35 year-olds used the internet, and what impact this had on their romantic lives. The results, published in the Eastern Economic Journal, found a strong correlation between high levels of internet use and low marriage rates, a factor that was even more significant for men who viewed online pornography on a regular basis.

And it’s not just pornography. Social media in particular has been blamed as a distraction, with people obsessing over their screens instead of their sexual lives. This is an extension of research that previously suggested having a TV in a couple's bedroom significantly reduces sexual activity. It would make sense that the intrusion of social media devices into all aspects of our lives could have a similar effect.



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But there are good reasons to question some of these conclusions. Researchers are split on the impact of pornography on our sexual lives, with many debating the existence of ‘internet sex addiction’ in the first place. Others have noted the potential for pornography to enhance sexual activity. For example, in 2015 an article in the journal *Sexual Medicine* found that watching at least 40 minutes of porn at least twice a week boosted people’s libido and desire to have sex.



A study tested the libido of 280 men measured against their use of pornography. The research found a strong correlation between the amount of time spent viewing porn and the desire to have sex, with those who watched over two hours of porn per week having the highest levels of arousal.

These results were noted as well by Twenge, Sherman and Wells in their research, who, despite finding overall drops in sexual activity, found no difference in sexual activity amongst those who frequently watched pornography.





Dating apps should make it easier than ever to find a sexual partner - yet millennials appear to be having less sex than previous generations (Credit: Getty Images)

The same can be said for social media. While social devices can certainly provide a distraction they also provide increasing avenues to access 'sex on tap'. In fact research has shown that apps such as Grindr and Tinder may [speed up people's sexual lives](#), enabling sex on dates earlier and more regularly.

While technology definitely impacts our sexual lives, it cannot be blamed solely for

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SEARCHED TO THE DEEP

Despite early dreams of a population liberated from work, our jobs seems to be intruding even further into our lives. Work hours remain extremely high across the Western world, with data recently showing that the average full-time employee in the US works 47 hours per week. It may seem logical to conclude that the fatigue and stress of work may lead to drops in sexual activity.

However it is not quite as simple as that. In 1998 for example Janet Hyde, John DeLamater and Erri Hewitt found in their research, published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, that there was no reduction in sexual activity, satisfaction or desire between women who were homemakers and women who were employed either part-time or full-time. Contrary to the rest of their findings, Twenge, Sherman and Wells actually found that a busy work life correlated with higher sexual frequency.





Life in the fast lane can leave people feeling anxious, exhausted, and depressed - all of which may take a toll on their sex lives (Credit: Alamy)

But that does not mean work does not have an impact; instead, it's the quality, rather than the quantity, of our work that matters. Having a bad job can be worse for your mental health than having no job, and this extends to our sexual lives as well. Stress in particular is increasingly being seen as the core indicator of drops in sexual activity and sexual happiness.

In 2010, for example, Guy Bodenmenn at the University of Zurich and his research



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levels of sexual activity and satisfaction. There are multiple impacts of stress, including changing hormone levels, contributing to negative body image, making us question relationships and partners, and increasing levels of drug and alcohol use. All of these have correlations between drops in sexual activity and sexual drive.

It's about modern life



There are many other reasons to think that changes in our mental health and being may be damaging our sex lives. While Twenge, Sherman and Wells discounted both pornography use and work hours as causes behind the drops in sexual activity, the researchers argued the drops may be due to increasing levels of unhappiness. Western societies in particular have seen a mental health epidemic in the past few decades, focused primarily around depression and anxiety disorders.

There is a strong correlation between depressive symptoms and reduction in sexual activity and desire. Conducting a review of relevant studies for the [Journal of Sexual Medicine](#), Evan Atlantis and Thomas Sullivan at the University of Adelaide found significant evidence that depression leads to increases in sexual dysfunction and reductions in sexual desire. Bringing this evidence together with the noted increases in mental health issues, Twenge, Sherman and Wells argue there is a causal link



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Research connects these mental health epidemics with the increasingly insecure nature of modern life, particularly for younger generations. It is this generation that has shown the highest drops in sexual activity, with research from Jean Twenge showing millennials are reporting having fewer sexual encounters than either Generation X or the baby boomers did at the same age. Job and housing insecurity, the fear of climate change, and the destruction of communal spaces and social life, all been found to connect to mental health problems.

A mixture of work, insecurity and technology is leading us all to feel slightly less aroused

Drops in sexual activity could be argued, therefore, to reflect the nature of modern life. This phenomenon cannot be equated with one problem or another, but is in fact the culmination of many things. It is the creation of the stresses of modern life – a mixture of work, insecurity and technology.





Diagnoses of depression and anxiety have continued to rise during the last decade  
(Credit: Alamy)

Some may celebrate drops in sexual activity as a rejection of loosening sexual mores. But sex is important. It increases happiness, makes you healthier, and even makes you more satisfied at work. Most importantly, for the vast majority of people, sex is fun.

It is for these reasons that people around the world are trying to find ways to deal with this issue. In February this year Per-Erik Muskos, a councilman from the town



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the benefits of sex, saying his proposal could “be an opportunity for couples to have their own time, only for each other.”

Japan has been trying to deal with this issue for a long time, particularly over fears of a plummeting birth rate. Parents in Japan are now being provided cash for having children, while for years companies have been encouraged to give citizens more off work to procreate. This has involved one of the country’s large economic organisations, Keidanren, encouraging its 1,600 corporate members to allow their employees to spend more time with their families. Meanwhile, local authorities have encouraged procreation through a range of measures, including providing shopping vouchers to larger families and launching government-sanctioned matchmaker websites. The Australian government pursued something similar for many years, providing a ‘baby bonus’ to new parents up until 2014.

The problem with these proposals is that they are inevitably just a band-aid. While additional time off work and government incentives may have short-term effects, they do not deal with the structural problems behind the drops in happiness that may be dampening sex drives.

Just as this problem is multi-dimensional, so the solutions must be multi-



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underpinned by job and housing insecurity, fears of climate change, and the loss of communal and social spaces. Doing so will not just help people with their sex lives, but benefit health and wellbeing overall.

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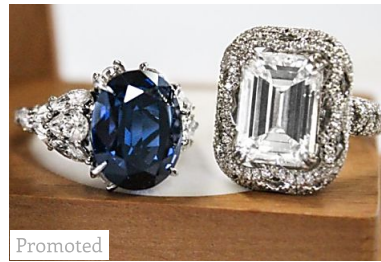
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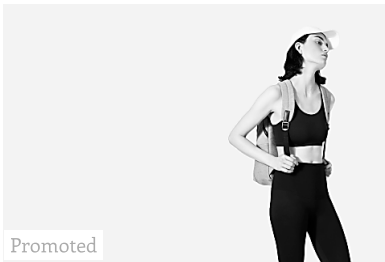


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